The Ghost in the Machine: Gilliam's Postmodern Response in *Brazil* to the Orwellian Dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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GEORGE ORWELL'S *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR* paints an unrelentingly somber picture of a totalitarian State, a dystopic society that manipulates external opposition as a means to extend and nourish itself. Examples abound of the discourse of its adversaries, real or imagined, being appropriated by the master discourse of Oceania, Newspeak, such that the former enters into a symbiotic relationship with the latter, becomes its "necessary complement" (Lyotard 206–07).[1]

The "Enemy of the People," Emmanuel Goldstein, commands "a vast shadowy army," named the Brotherhood, "an underground network of conspirators dedicated to the overthrow of the State" (Orwell 15).[2] Like the mysterious terrorists in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*, however, we never catch a glimpse of the members of the Brotherhood. But constant reference to its ubiquitous presence by the authorities serves as a rallying cry to unleash hatred and defuse discontent. As Julia, Orwell's female protagonist suggests, moreover, though the telescreen carries daily news of the war with Eurasia, no war might exist; the government of Oceania might itself be firing rockets on its own capital, London.

The male protagonist Winston Smith anticipates the overthrow of the State. He puts his hopes in the lowest class, the proles, but comes to realize that they will never rebel (72). At one point, he sees Julia's love as "the force that would tear the party to pieces" (133), but no such thing happens. He finally acknowledges that, "In this game that we're playing, we can't win. Some kinds of failure are better than other kinds, that's all" (142). Julia, on the other hand, harbors the belief that they can create a secret world in the midst of dystopia, in which they can live as they choose (142). Objects and scenes figuring sanctuary recur—empirical places where they believe they can escape surveillance (the countryside, the room over Mr. Charrington's pawnshop), or ideal places or things offering the prospect of asylum (the Golden Country, the miniature world inside the glass paperweight, the hidden life of the proles).

Winston believes with Julia that "They can't get inside you. If you can *feel* that staying human is worth while, even when it can't have any result whatever, you've beaten them" (174). But that last hope is dashed. He asserts that one can be victorious by hating the system even as it crushes one, that they could blow his brain to pieces before "they could reclaim it.

The heretical thought would be unpunished, unrepented, out of their reach forever. They would have blown a hole in their own perfection. To die hating them, that was freedom" (294). But he fails to envisage the efficacy of brainwashing and realizes finally that they can indeed "get inside you" (303). In the end he succumbs totally: "everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" (311). The society of Orwell's 1984 is a dystopia that holds forth no hope and against which all resistance is unavailing.

In his 1985 film *Brazil,* Terry Gilliam redeploys several scenes from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that reflect the multiple facets of Orwellian dystopia, a State system of Terror which unremittingly seeks control over the lives of its citizens. Gilliam reworks Orwell's themes, however, and subtly and relentlessly undermines Statist utopia by opening up cracks and fissures inherent in its totalizing vision.

In his book, *The Parasite,* Michel Serres points to the flaws inherent in the phenomenon of system that allow it to be exploited from within. No system functions to perfection, he states, "without loss, without leakage, without wear, without error, without accident, without opacity" (22). He consequently reconceptualizes system as integrally bound to its own "slips" *(écarts).* "The [idea of a] book of slips," he says, "of [strange] noise and of disorder, would [distress] only . . . those who would defend the idea of a God-Author who has designed an incorruptibly trustworthy world. It's not like that. The slip is part of the thing itself," he concludes, "and perhaps even produces it" (22–23). This idea accords with Derrida's assertion that "Law implies a counter-law [. . .] lodged at the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination" (Derrida, "La loi du genre" 178).

While *Brazil* recalls throughout the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* unlike the Orwellian dystopia, the fallacies, inconsistencies, and ultimate fragility of the System in *Brazil* lay it open to challenge from within. The film is not merely a brilliant recontextualization of Orwellian themes through adept pastiche, but in point of fact a paronomasiac satire, that is, a satire which rejects Orwell's projection of dystopic uselessness by means of a strategic repetition or iterability that changes context, moves away from the grounding of Orwell's text (Krajewski 187).[3] Derrida speaks of how repetition (iterability) changes the context of that which is repeated, consequently modifying or shifting its meaning. Essentially Gilliam's postmodern rerendering of Orwell's dystopia (and utopias in general) exemplifies the working of Derrida's notion of iterability. He presents us with constantly changing perspectives and contexts (images, scenes), which inveigh against the tendency of a totalizing schema that would impose a univocal meaning (Derrida, *Archeology* 127). In place of the Orwellian vision of dystopia as an absolute state in which characters are mercilessly ground down, Gilliam's *Brazil* introduces characters who are ultimately unseizable. The enabling process for bringing about this state grows out of the system itself.

The instability and gratuitousness of the System is conveyed in a scene at the outset of the film where a functionary, bothered by a fly in his office,

piles up a column of objects to enable him to swat it on the ceiling. The makeshift structure, tottering, barely holding up, figures the frailty of the supports anchoring the System. The scene ends with the dead fly falling into a computer, causing it to mistype the name Buttle for Tuttle, an error that leads to the tragic sequence of events that results in Buttle's liquidation.

We needn't look far in *Brazil* for signs of instability at the core of the totalitarian System. However quaintly antiquated the machines of *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* the fact is, they generally work. In *Brazil,* things constantly malfunction—the machines of the Ministry of Information are prone to all sorts of error; the breakdown of the airconditioning unit in the apartment of Sam Lowry (Jonathan Pryce) underscores the helplessness and incompetency of those it supposedly serves; the elevators misrespond or fail to respond at all; gadgets of all description meant to ease people's existence seem never to operate as called for.

Images of verticality, commented on by Pauline Kael in her review of *Brazil* (106), appropriately convey the spatial disposition of a totalitarian state defined by a pyramidal, hierarchical structure, in which power flows from the top. They mark both Orwell's novel and Gilliam's film. But they function quite differently in the two works.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* though verticality dominates, the movement is usually downward, the downward movement of the dystopia, where only oppression and subordination, not release, are possible. "[T]he black-moustachio'd face [of Big Brother gazes] down from every commanding corner" (4). Helicopters descend from the sky to peer into people's windows (4). Winston thinks of his disappeared mother as "sitting in some place deep down beneath him [. . .] down in some subterranean place—the bottom of a well, for instance, or a very deep grave—but it was a place which, already far below him, was itself moving downwards" (31). He also recalls the childhood memory of his father, during a bomb raid, leading him "down, down, down into some place deep in the earth [. . .]" (35). Even the development of Newspeak, the official language, resembles an inverted linguistic pyramid operating through the contraction of vocabulary to "narrow the range of thought," all the better to automatize it (54–55).

In *Brazil,* on the other hand, the visuals constantly urge our gaze upwards, towards the upper stories of the Ministry of Information building that towers over the city, towards the skies through which Sam flies in his dreams. From one perspective, this verticality analogizes the verticality of the pyramidal system of totalitarianism, the hierarchy whereby a few at the top control the masses at the bottom. Promotion in the system means moving to an upper floor. On the very top floor is the penthouse inhabited by Mr. Helpmann, the Deputy Minister, whose name and paralysis suggest the dysfunctionality of the system itself.

Movement between levels is constantly impeded by the malfunctioning of the elevators. The helplessness of humans confronted by machines is epitomized in the scene where Sam, in the glass-encased elevator, sees, below him in the lobby, Jill Layton (Kim Greist), whom he has sought vainly. But

his attempt to reach her is frustrated by the upredictability of the elevator that carries him upward.

Signs of the instability of the system, as noted earlier, are ubiquitous. But of greater significance is the way characters overcome the system from within and turn verticality to their own ends. Sam discovers the code that allows him to ascend, unauthorized, to the top level in order to delete Jill's name from the list of suspects sought by the authorities.

The way Sam learns the code that will allow him to take the elevator to the penthouse is a key to "reading" *Brazil*. While visiting a party at his mother's apartment, Mr. Helpmann, a paralytic and a friend of Sam's dead father, asks Sam to help him to use the toilet. Afterward, as Helpmann props himself against the sink, he spills some talcum powder and on impulse traces in it the words "ERE I AM J H," remarking to Sam that his father is "the ghost in the machine." Bruce Krejewski acutely notes that the words consist of an anagram for the name of Sam's father, Jeremiah, which in Hebrew means "God will elevate" (Krejewski 196). These words spell out the code that allows Sam to operate the elevator in order to reach the deserted penthouse at night. They also foreshadow the elevation of Sam at the end of the American version, where he takes wing into the clouds. Both events are tropes for the circumvention of the conventional usage of totalitarian pathways.

Anagrammatic play involves the creation, through the transposition of the letters of a word, of a new word, as its Greek root indicates *(anagrammatizein)*. In other words (literally), it involves a rearrrangement of basic elements. Its use within Gilliam's film as a key word (again, literally, a word to be keyed in to operate the elevator), that allows Sam to reach the penthouse and infiltrate the system, serves as an allegory for the strategy of the film itself, which recasts the elements of the dystopia/utopia into a new configuration that evades or undermines the operation of a totalizing system. Need we emphasize the importance of play (anagrammatical as well as play in general) as a reconfiguring of univocality into plurivocality—a postmodern strategy to counter totalizing systems through proliferating discourses, a levelling operation that puts all discourses on the same level. It calls to my mind the fairytale in which a troll is caught burying a treasure beneath a tree. The woodsman who discovers him marks the tree with an "x" and makes the troll give his word that he will not efface the mark in his absence. He returns to find the troll gone and all the trees marked with an "x." The troll's "x"'s are the sign of oppositional discourse.

Ironically, the description of Sam's father as "the ghost in the machine" alludes to the flaw at the heart of the system, that permits access to a space for opposition within the dominant structure of dystopia.[4] The moonlighting handyman and *bricoleur* Harry Tuttle (Robert de Niro) exemplifies a way other than that of Sam, who avails himself of the ghost code to take the elevator to the penthouse, to overcome the hierarchical verticality of the State. Tuttle does this simply by bypassing those entryways and exits it controls (the allegorical refusal of controlling metastatements—Lyotard 207): that is, Tuttle doesn't use stairs and elevators, but with lines and grappling hooks overcomes gravity and mechanical contrivances to move up and down tall buildings at will.

The office workers who, the moment Mr. Kurtzmann, the Director of the Department of Records, closes his door, use the computer terminals as television sets to watch the film *Casablanca* also find a way to evade the standard operating procedure of the system. Such seemingly innocuous forms of evasion on the part of characters who momentarily carve out a niche of refuge within the system can be seen as representing, from one viewpoint, the strange noise and disorder mentioned by Serres that distresses those who look upon the system as a perfect, utopic ordering structure in a corrupt and disorderly world. From a reversed point of view, we can formulate the totalizing structure of the (dis)utopic State itself as the source of noise that seeks to drown out any discordant or countering discourse. One of the primary means by which the State controls and directs thought and speech is through the deprivation in individuals of the state of self-consciousness, constituted by difference, and their integration into a conformistic pattern determined by the State. Thus the thought and speech of people in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is radically circumscribed by Newspeak, which narrows the range of possible speech patterns and regularizes a type of production-line speech bereft of superfluity (supplementarity) and difference, that all people will share—the speech of the State. The project of the State is to eliminate all thought and speech that diverge in unacceptable measure from that of the State (exception given to oppositional forms sanctioned and strictly monitored by the State).

Yet another manifestation of a delimiting or inhibiting factor appears in the use of slogans, symbols, signs, and directives in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brazil*. In the foyer of the Ministry of Information in *Brazil* is a huge statue devoted to "TRUTH." Signs on the wall in public places warn against terrorist bombs: "Mind that parcel." The characters in opposition occasionally deflect the message of these signs in oppositional directions, just as they attempt to turn the mechanisms of the State to serve their own purposes. For example, a ubiquitous official sign claims our attention: "Happiness—we're all in this together," it says. When Tuttle leaves Sam, grateful that Sam has sent away the servicemen from Central Services who might have discovered him, he also remarks to Sam: "We're all in this together." However, Harry recycles the State slogan, which signifies the conformity of everyone under a central authority, to signify a brotherhood of the minority in opposition. Contrasting discourses also appear in the official sign on the wall of the torture chamber—"Who can you trust?"—and the handwritten sign Sam holds up for Jill to read through the truck window: "Trust me." Statist signs are means to control, direct, and deceive—as in the aerial shot that lets us see the billboards lining the road along which Jill drives her truck, which depict idyllic scenes of bliss and harmony, while hiding a desolate landscape of waste and ruin.

In both films the idea of dialogue arises as a countering device to the totalitarian structures of Statist society. State speech is monological, not unlike the type of monologue we find in traditional ethnocentric discourse, which, in seeking to know the other through scientific analysis, constitutes

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that other in terms of itself, its ideological grounding. Conversely, dialogue allows the other to speak for itself as a subject equal to us instead of as an object of knowledge. The difficulties of representing the other inhere in "the irreducible difference or nonidentity between the order of phenomena and that of our conceptual constructions" (Adorno 148). Even if we were to replace this conceptualization of other as object of knowledge by the idea of other as subject of discourse, no less do we encounter the problem of how, in speaking for the other, in representing the speech of the other, in conceptualizing the other in our own terms, we can avoid the erosion of difference existing between us.

Thus, dialogue stands as an enabling means for the comprehension of the other. There would indeed be no other in the perfect utopian or dystopian state. In the less than perfect forms, that other would be the *lumpenproletariat* and other outcasts on the margin of society, within its boundaries but outside its limits (the *metoikoi* of Greek society, the greasy foreigner of Lyotard's *Pacific Wall*). Certain characters in the two films establish dialogue. But, while in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we come to realize that the State, in the person of O'Brien, plants an interlocuteur who engages in a false dialogue to draw in the innocent and restore them to control, in *Brazil,* an authentic dialogue exchange exists alongside the Statist monologue. Sam and Jill, after considerable resistance on the part of the latter, who fears that a trap is being set by either the terrorists or the State, begin a dialogue, as do Sam and Harry Tuttle. Dialogue draws together members of a secondary brother/sisterhood of oppositionality that parallels the conformistic Brotherhood of the State. Individuals of the former instinctively recognize each other through a look, a phrase, or a gesture. With Tuttle's codewords, "We are all in this together," Gilliam rewrites the scene in *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* where Winston caught O'Brien's eye and knew that "he [O'Brien] *knew.* [. . .] Their self-same thought was 'I am with you'" (19). For, far from indicating a secret brotherhood, the sign of complicity Winston sees in O'Brien's eyes is a device to trap Winston and betray him.

In another context, Michel Serres again uses the idea of "noise," but as an inhibiting factor that seeks control. He speaks of the attempt of dialogue to do away with interference or *noise* ("the set of [. . .] phenomena of interference that become obstacles to communication" ["Platonic Dialogue" 66]). Communication consists of two interlocutors "united against the phenomena of interference and confusion, or against individuals with some stake in interrupting communication" (67). Thus,

> *To hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him;* a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man. The most profound dialectical problem is not the problem of the Other, who is only a variety—or a variation—of the Same, it is the problem of the third man. We might call this third man the *demon,* the prosopopeia of noise. (67, author's italics)

In *Brazil* the third man or the *tertium quid,* the noise that impedes or prevents communication between two interlocutors (Sam and Jill, Sam and Harry Tuttle), can be construed as the Statist or magisterial third, which is excluded, ideally prevented from misshaping, interfering with or appropriating

the communication. It is the demon that must be exorcised so that the marginal other might be heard (this demon appears in Sam's dreams as a monstrous samurai-like apparition that rises up against him as he seeks Jill). Only the shutting out of the noise of the State, the exclusion of the magisterial monologue, can effect entry into the discourse of the other.[5] In *Brazil* the characters do occasionally achieve such an exclusion and enter into dialogue, though that dialogue is shortlived. Such discontinuous local effects leave no lasting deliverance from the State, but they do work towards the type of relativism of which Lyotard speaks, "in a strong, general sense of the term, that is by accelerating the decline of the idea of a [totalizing] truth, by contributing to its deterioration" (213).

A good example of one of these discontinuous local effects results from the way a totalitarian device of the State is redeployed as a tactic of opposition by Sam. That device lies in the act/motif of deletion. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* by deletion of the names of antagonists who have been "vaporized," the State condemns them to oblivion. Similarly, in *Brazil,* the State deletes the names of people, like Buttle, whom it has liquidated. such an act of deletion used by the State against its real or perceived enemies is turned to advantage by Lowry, who deletes Jill's name from the State register as a means of saving her, by making her unknown to the authorities. Though these discontinuous local effects are shortlived, they bring about, Lyotard says, "something . . . which would be neither trust nor mistrust, something we could call tragic, etc., which would however be more like humor" (213–14). By means of such "humor," pastiche or satire, and by means of individual empowerment through dialogue that calls into question Statist monologue, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* works in particular instances to erode the totalitarian State.

Is there a more fundamental, and lasting, way of countering the power of the State? When Sam appears in the beginning, he leads a cozy existence in the bosom of the system. In his dreams he grapples with monsters that enslave the dream figures and saves a beautiful heroine who takes on the features of Jill. By the end of the film, it appears that Sam is done in by the system and its verticality. He is strapped to a chair and is being tortured with instruments wielded by his former friend Jack Lint (Michael Palin) while Mr. Helpmann looks on. Suddenly, from on high, Tuttle and his assault troops descend on ropes from the dome of the auditorium, kill Helpmann and Jack, destroy the Ministry Building, and carry Sam to safety.

The fact is, these events do not happen empirically, only oneirically, in Sam's tortured delusion. Nevertheless, that very delusion allows Sam to escape the clutches of his torturers. As he slides into delirium, we hear in the background Mr. Helpmann's voice, saying, "He's got away from us, Jack," and Jack, answering, "Afraid you're right, Mr. Helpmann." At that moment the dome of the torture chamber fills with fleecy clouds, and the ramp leading to the chair in which Sam is strapped extends beyond, into the same cumulus-filled sky where he had earlier dreamt himself as flying.[6]

Commenting on this ending in an article entitled "The Location of *Brazil,*" Salman Rushdie sees it as suggesting the triumph of the imagination

and dream over the shackles of actuality" (121). He remarks that "Unreality is the only weapon with which [totalitarian] reality can be smashed so it may subsequently be reconstructed " (122). Gilliam himself, in speaking of how Sam escapes his torturers, comments that he has always considered escape into madness "a reasonable approach to life in certain situations. To me, that's an optimistic ending, Lowry's imagination is still free and alive; they haven't got that. They may have his body, but they don't have his mind" (Bennetts 16).

Gilliam's film decenters the State. In contrast to Orwell's dystopia, it is a State without control. We encounter no Big Brother, no leader or head (the highest official is the paralyzed Deputy Minister). Central Services operates without a center. Objects often come to serve not the ends of the State but transmogrify into animate objects that serve their own cryptic, apparently aimless ends: the airconditioning that roars like a monster and whose ducts appear like giant entrails or tentacles that encroach on Sam's tranquil existence; the fly that falls into the computer and shortcircuits it; the blowing paper that swallows up Tuttle; the paving stones in Sam's dream that reach up to grab him. The function of these animated objects would seem to underscore the arbitrary nature of magistral power.

In Gilliam's film unreality takes the form of postmodern satire, by means of which he responds to the threat of the totalizing systems and metanarratives of the Information Age so disconcertingly depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But it is the unreality of dream and imagination, posited on difference, that opposes the unreality of utopian perfection, eutopia, which, with its totalizing imposition of sameness, carries within it the reverse image of dystopia. Gilliam satirizes utopian creations in several instances. There is the country of lost youth which Sam's mother, Ida Lowry, seeks through surgical reconstructions of her face and body that bring her back through a series of younger and younger reincarnations, to the point where she disintegrates into dust. There are the ramshackle slum apartments where the Buttle family lives, grandly called "Shangrila Towers." There are the idyllic vistas depicted on the billboards at the side of the highway. Finally, there is the title of the film itself that evokes an exotic and distant place and the 1939 song whose lyrical refrains speak of love, separation, and return. 1939 was, in fact, a time when American society was putting the Great Depression behind it and was not yet engaged in the horrors of World War II. Gilliam, being an American by birth, was indeed mindful of that period, whose songs, films, bestsellers, and magazine advertisements held forth the promise of an ideal life, which would collapse with the cataclysm of a world war and the slaughter of innocents in Buchenwald and a hundred other places.

At one point in Orwell's novel, O'Brien calls Winston "a flaw in the pattern [. . .], a stain that must be wiped out" (267). The difference between Orwell's world and that of Gilliam is that in the former the external resistance of Winston and others is easily countered by the State, and the flaw corrected. While in *Brazil*, the fly in the computer and the ghost in the machine[7] signify, first, that the System is out of control, secondly, that the flaw is part of the System itself which characters can turn to their own

purposes in small acts of opposition within it that make life, even in a totalitarian society, sustainable.

NOTES

1. Lyotard speaks of the "ruse" of magisterial discourse, "which consists precisely in requiring that we place ourselves outside of it in order to avoid it," thereby "making exteriority the necessary complement of that discourse" (206–07).

2. The film version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* directed and written by Michael Radford (starring John Hurt, Burton, Suzanna Hamilton, and Cyril Cusak), which had not appeared prior to Gilliam's filming of *Brazil,* closely follows the written narrative. Inasmuch as the intertext of Gilliam's film would have been the book and not the film, however, my comparison is founded on the latter.

3. *Paronomasia* means "a playing on words, which sound alike, a pun" *(OED).*

4. Ross Chambers says that ". . . between the possibility of disturbance in the system and the system's power to recuperate that disturbance, there is 'room for maneuver,'" that is, space for "play" or "leeway" in the system in which "oppositionality arises and change can occur" (Chambers xi).

5. The excluded third can also be theorized as the object the two interlocutors seek through dialogue. In this instance, the space for self/mutual realization. Gadamer describes dialogue as an exchange in which the interlocutors seek a third entity that eludes their comprehension (cited by Kauffmann 187).

6. This ending is not to be found in the original English version of the film, but was added later in the American version. For Gilliam's contention with Universal Studios who wanted to commercialize the film, see Matthews.

7. These phrases resemble what Michael Riffaterre calls hypograms. They form part of a descriptive system that suggests clichés already present in the viewer's mind ("the fly in the ointment," etc.), and provide us with interpretive keys. (Riffaterre 39 et passim)

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